

On the generic status and geographical variation of the Namaqua Prinia

by P. A. Clancey

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The so-called Namaqua Prinia (or Warbler) was introduced to science in 1842 under the binomen *Drymoica substriata* A. Smith, on the basis of specimens collected by the describer along the Olifants R. of the western Cape, and is currently generally treated as being a species of prinia. Interest in its taxonomic status has been aroused by its recent relegation to a newly proposed genus—*Phragmacia* Brooke & Dean (1990)—on being divorced from the genus *Prinia* Horsfield, 1821, the type-species of which is *Prinia familiaris* Horsfield of Java, Indonesia. Apart from being proposed in *Drymoica* Swainson, 1827 (type-species *D. macroura* (Latham) = *Prinia maculosa* (Boddaert)), and current placing in *Prinia*, the Namaqua Prinia has on occasion, following Sharpe (1883), been referred to a further Asiatic genus, *Burnesia* Jerdon (*ex* Blyth MS), 1863, the type of which is *Prinia lepida* Blyth, which = *P. gracilis lepida* of modern usage. Both Wolters (1980) and Traylor (1986) view *substriata* as a species of *Prinia*, *sensu lato*, as do Hall & Moreau (1970) and Clancey (1980).

The characters advanced to justify the erection of the monotypic genus *Phragmacia* for *substriata* are that the three central pairs of rectrices are of closely comparable length, the tail profile thereby less strongly graduated than in most *Prinia* spp.; the entire tail of 10 quills is also plain, the feathers lacking the dark subterminal bar; and the rictal bristles are on the whole shorter. More significantly, the nest architecture of *substriata* differs markedly from that characterizing species of *Prinia*, this being fully detailed by Brooke & Dean. Briefly, the nest is a deep, open cup placed low down in screening riparian vegetation or among flood debris, and is not a woven oval of plant material with an upper lateral entrance as in typical *Prinia* spp. The ground-colour of the otherwise spotted eggs is also claimed as diagnostically significant in being a deep bright blue. Of some moment is that Brooke & Dean make no mention of the longer bill of *substriata* as a possible generic character, *contra* Hall & Moreau (1970), which these latter workers suggest reveals linkage between *substriata* and the spatially remote *Prinia robertsi* Benson of the frontier highlands between Zimbabwe and southern Mozambique, which, however, differs from *substriata* in having only 8 as opposed to 10 rectrices.

While readily conceding that a valid *prima facie* case for the transfer of *substriata* from *Prinia* to *Phragmacia* has been made out, the species' phylogenetic background and relationships with other closely allied Afrotropical *Prinia* spp. require to be evaluated and elucidated before its general adoption. Its generic relationship to the problematical *P. robertsi* must first be resolved, as well as to other species occurring further north in the continent seen as probably deriving from the same evolutionary radiation and inhabiting like arid country, such as *P. somalica* (Elliot). In

so far as the present enquiry into the geographical variation of *substriata* is concerned, it is here treated without prejudice as a member of the genus *Prinia*.

The Namaqua *Prinia* is a denizen of thorn and riparian thickets, often with reeds, of both perennial and seasonally dry watercourses in the Karoo biome of the South West Arid Zone of the Afrotropics. It is distributed from the valley of the Olifants R. in the western Cape Province and the lower Orange R. drainage in southern Great Namaqualand, Namibia, and the north-western Cape (Williams 1987), east to the Great Fish R., eastern Cape, to *c.* 26°E, and the western parts of the Orange Free State (to *c.* 28°S and 27°E) (Earlé & Grobler 1987). The range is seemingly more continuous and extensive than indicated in the map in Hall & Moreau (1970). It is localized but not rare, occurring in pairs and small family parties after breeding within the limits imposed by its chosen habitat, and subsisting mainly on insects and on small fruits and seeds (Table 1 in Brooke & Dean).

The sexes are closely similar, the female ranging smaller than the male, with a shorter tail. There is no assumption of a distinct nuptial mode of dress as in many *Prinia* spp., this in part a correlate of the open cup-shaped style of nest it constructs. A complete moult (contour plumage, wings and tail) is effected from April through to June, the species commencing to breed from the latter part of August to about January. The juvenile is seemingly undescribed, but one dated 13 November 1956, from Fraserburg–Beaufort West in the Karoo, resembles the adult but is lighter and buffier above, the white ventral surface with obsolete breast streaking, while the apices of the tail-feathers are discoloured and ochre tinged. The tail is shorter than in adults, measuring only 59 mm.

The Namaqua *Prinia* is not well represented in museum collections, and the possibility of its showing any geographical variation has seemingly not been investigated hitherto. A recent study of such material as exists in southern African institutions has revealed that the species varies sufficiently in coloration as to be viewed as polytypic and its populations grouped into two formal subspecies. Variation of subspecific import affects the upper-parts, which vary from a warm fulvous brown in the singularly arid northwest of the range to a duller olivaceous wood brown in the south and east. Ventrally, there is appreciable variation in the whiteness of the fore-throat and breast and the buffiness of the flanks, crissal surfaces and under tail-coverts, but, strangely enough, there is no demonstrable difference in mensural characters throughout the entire range. The colour variation is closely correlated with the general colour of the substrate and rainfall levels, some populations occurring in country which may experience little or no rain some years (as in the northwest) to as much as 500 mm annually elsewhere. Two races may be recognized, as laid out hereunder:

Prinia substriata substriata (Smith)

Drymoica substriata A. Smith, *Illustr. Zool. South Africa*, Aves, 1842, pl. 72, fig. 1, and text: banks of the Olifants R., western Cape Province, the type-locality restricted to Clanwilliam.

Dorsal surface light Dresden Brown (Ridgway 1912), reddening slightly over the rump. Ventral ground-colour cold white, the breast narrowly streaked with greyish black; lower lateral body surfaces, flanks, crissum and under tail-coverts dull Tawny-Olive. Tail plain umber brown, lightening laterally.

Measurements. Wings of 10 ♂♂ 52.5–57.5 (55.5), s.d. 1.79; culmens from skull 15–16 (15.2), s.d. 0.35; tarsi 20–21.5 (20.9), s.d. 0.69; tails 67–75 (69.7), s.d. 2.26. Wings of 10 ♀♀ 50–54 (52.2), s.d. 1.33; culmens 15–17 (15.5), s.d. 0.64; tarsi 19.5–22 (20.7), s.d. 0.75; tails 60–68.5 (64.7), s.d. 2.52 mm.

Material examined. 37. *Cape Province:* near Liebendal (Olifants R.), Klaver, Vanrhynsdorp, Sutherland, Fraserburg, Beaufort West, Victoria West, Dwyka, Prieska, Murraysburg, Graaff-Reinet, Seekoegat (33°05'S, 22°30'E), Georgida (Willowmore), Traka, Oudtshoorn; *O.F.S.:* Glen, Oranjekrag, Allemansdrift. Rainfall generally 120–500 mm p.a.

Range. Southern Little Namaqualand and the middle and lower Olifants R. drainage, western Cape, through the Karoo regions to reach the mid-Orange at Prieska, the Orange Free State south of 28° to 27°E, and in the Cape to the Great Fish R. valley at c. 26°E, and in the south to Oudtshoorn and further east to Willowmore. Sedentary.

Remarks. Hall & Moreau (1970), in their *Atlas of Speciation*, show a major cluster of records of *P. substriata* for the northwestern Cape to the north of the Olifants R., most of which appear to be of wrongly determined specimens of juvenile *P. maculosa* in a southern African collection.

***Prinia substriata confinis* subsp. nov.**

Type. ♂, adult. Violsdrif (formerly Goodhouse), lower Orange R., north-western Cape, at 28°53'S, 18°15'E. 16 August 1937. Collected on Barlow/Transvaal Museum Expedition. In the collection of the Transvaal Museum, Pretoria, T.M.Reg. No. 21717.

Description. Upper-parts more fulvous than in *P. s. substriata*, being a light ochreous Brussels Brown (August/September), *versus* greyish Dresden Brown at the same time. Ventrally warmer white, with finer greyish-black breast-streaking, and lower lateral and crissal surfaces and under tail-coverts pale Cinnamon-Buff as against dull Tawny-Olive. Similar in size.

Measurements. Wings of 10 ♂♂ 53–57 (55.1), s.d. 1.39; culmens 15–16.5 (15.6), s.d. 0.53 ($n=8$); tarsi 21–22 (21.4), s.d. 0.56 ($n=8$); tails 65–75 (69.7), s.d. 2.50. Wings of 4 ♀♀ 51.5–54 (52.6); culmens 15.5; tarsi 20.5–21.5 (20.8); tails 62.5–67.5 (64.3) mm.

Material examined. 16. *Cape Province:* Violsdrif (Goodhouse), Kenhardt, Upington. Rainfall from frequently nil to 120 mm p.a.

Range. Arid lower reaches of the Orange R. from about its confluence with the Great Fish R. of Namibia and the Richtersveld, east to Bushmanland, the Kenhardt district and southern Gordonia at Upington to 22°E, east of which it intergrades with the nominate race (as at Prieska on the mid-Orange).

Measurements of the type (mm). Wing (flattened) 55, culmen from skull 16.5, tarsus 22, tail 70.

Etymology. *Confinis*—Latin, adjacent to.

Remarks. Hoesch & Niethammer (1940) give the weights of 3 ♂♀ taken in January at Goodhouse by Niethammer as 9, 9.5 and 10.5 g.

The colour variation here described in respect of the arid lower Orange R. population of *P. substriata* parallels closely that recently shown to be present in a second sympatric endemic warbler, namely, the Cinnamon-breasted Warbler *Euryptila subcinnamomea* (Smith), which likewise had not been previously closely studied (Clancey 1990). *E. s. petrophila* was, like *P. s. confinis*, proposed from the desertic lower Orange valley.

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Types, type localities, and variation in some races of the Colasisi or Philippine Hanging Parrot *Loriculus philippensis*

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The Colasisi or Philippine Hanging Parrot is a highly variable species, with 11 races recognized by duPont (1971). The nomenclature of the